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SERVICE

USDA'S REPORT TO CONSUMERS

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SOME WOODEN HOUSES KEEP THEIR COMPOSURE

Others Just Decompose. Some houses built of wood seem to develop decay problems shortly after construction. But then, wood doesn't last forever, does it? Well, there are, in the U.S., wood houses built some 300 years ago and still standing strong. What is the difference? According to USDA's Forest Service, wood, being a biological material, will not deteriorate if properly used. If misused, it succumbs to the same processes that decompose dead trees in the forest--rotted by fungi or eaten by termites and other insects. In the forest, decomposition serves a useful purpose; in a house, especially if you live in it, decomposition means trouble and repair bills. The Forest Service recently prepared two booklets that can help your house live to a ripe old age, perhaps long enough to become a historical landmark. "Your Wood Can Last For Centuries" explains why wood decays--moisture being a prime culprit--and alerts you to conditions that create decay hazards. "You Can Protect Your Home From Termites" deals with that tiny pest that brings big trouble. The booklet helps you distinguish between termites and flying ants, identifies the most frequent termite danger areas, and provides information on how to prevent or control termites. Both booklets are illustrated with photographs and color artwork and both are for sale from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. "Your Wood Can Last For Centuries" is \$1.00 per copy; "You Can Protect Your Home From Termites" is 60 cents.

NEW USDA LOAN PROGRAM

To Help You Weather The Weather. A new loan program to help farmers and other rural homeowners insulate their homes was announced recently by USDA. The program, expected to be operational in about 2 months, will provide loans of about \$500 each to finance home improvements that reduce energy usage and cut heating and air conditioning bills. The loans will be repayable over a 5-year period at 8 percent interest. USDA estimates that savings in energy costs effected by the home weatherization will pay a large part of the loan cost to the homeowners. The program is a joint project of USDA's Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) and Rural Electrification Administration (REA) and local REA cooperatives. FmHA will provide the loan money; REA-financed electric systems will administer the program. The loans will be repaid through monthly rural electric cooperative bills. At the present time, information on the loan program is available at local offices of participating REA cooperatives.



SPRING FOOD PREVIEW

Retail food prices, led mainly by fresh produce and coffee, will be slightly higher this spring than they were during the winter. But with new spring crops of vegetables coming in and transportation freed from winter's ice, we can expect to see a better selection of food in the grocery stores, says USDA's Economic Research Service.

MEAT--A brighter spot for consumers is at the meat counter. Retail meat prices for spring will be below 1976 average prices. Farmers are sending large supplies of beef to market. Some farmers are doing so because higher production costs are causing them to lose money. Others, faced with the drought, are forced to reduce the size of their herds.

Many farmers reduced pork production in 1975 partly due to high feed and fuel costs. When the supply of pork became smaller, pork prices went up. Now, farmers will produce perhaps 10 percent more pork than last year. Retail pork prices should be well below last spring's prices.

POULTRY--The price of chicken generally increases as summer approaches, but probably will not this year due to competition from lower pork prices. Turkey will cost about the same as last spring. And, after Easter, egg prices should drop seasonally.

SEAFOOD--Prices for tuna, haddock, flounder, halibut, and ocean perch usually peak during winter and drop by summer. The harsh winter, making access to some fishing grounds difficult and hampering transportation, caused prices to rise more than usual. So, we are still on a higher price plane for this spring.

DAIRY--Prices won't change much at the dairy counter, unless milk price supports for producers are raised by April 1. If they are, dairy product prices may go up. If not, milk and ice cream prices will be fairly stable, and butter and cheese may cost slightly less than last spring.

VEGETABLES--Prices for processed vegetables will be about the same to moderately higher than last spring. This is especially true of canned tomatoes, concentrated tomato products, snap beans, spinach, and beets. Supplies of both canned and frozen corn and canned peas are big enough to keep these prices from rising much. Frozen carrots and broccoli are becoming more popular each year, and they, along with most frozen vegetables, will cost more.

However, canned and frozen vegetables are generally good buys for budget-conscious shoppers. Most canned and frozen vegetables are packed by major processors who make contracts with farmers before the growing seasons.

Fresh vegetable supplies are a different story. They fluctuate with the weather. Freezing temperatures in Florida damaged or destroyed some vegetable crops; in Texas, limited plantings of cabbage and carrots, due partly to cold, wet weather, held supplies down. As the weather improves and spring crops come in, prices of most fresh produce will drop. Cabbage and carrot prices will drift down as supplies increase from the spring crops in Florida and Texas. The spring tomato crop from Florida, plus continued Mexican imports, will be large enough to push prices below those of a year ago. The potato crop is a record large one, so prices will continue to be relatively low through spring. Onions, on the other hand, will tend to be higher priced than last spring because of the reduced Texas plantings.

FRUIT--Fresh fruit prices will go up some, mainly because of the Florida freeze. Oranges and grapefruit will cost more. But lemons will be a bargain; the crop was nearly a record. If early estimates of the freeze damage are accurate, prices of frozen concentrated orange juice may rise slightly from winter.

Noncitrus fruit and dried fruit, particularly raisins and prunes, will cost more than last spring because of smaller supplies. Prices for frozen fruit and berries will also go up moderately, especially for tart cherries and strawberries. Canned fruit prices will be fairly stable.

OTHER ITEMS--Coffee prices will continue to escalate. Coffee still costs less than most soft drinks, but tea and bouillon are the lowest priced of the usual beverage alternatives.

Sugar has dropped far below its 1975-76 record price. We can continue indulging ourselves for awhile, because world supplies are large and sugar prices follow a cycle of 2 to 5 years--it takes that long to grow sugarcane.

Dry edible beans are nutritious and traditionally economical. Pinto and kidney bean supplies are large, and prices are unusually low. Prices are slightly higher for blackeye peas, large lima beans, and garbanzos (chickpeas), but they are still good buys. Smaller crops of dry edible peas and lentils will keep those prices up, too.

Mushroom prices were fairly steady during winter. But since mushrooms are increasing in popularity, supplies probably will not meet the demand. So you can expect slightly higher prices.

Tree nuts are already higher priced than usual, mainly because of smaller crops and heavy demand. Almonds, walnuts, Macadamia nuts, filberts, and pecans will all cost more than last spring.

FOOD COMPOSITION

Section By Section. Agriculture Handbook 8, "Composition of Foods: Raw, Processed, and Prepared," has been a mainstay reference for nutritionists, dieticians, and others who need food composition data. Since the last revision of Handbook 8 in 1963, considerable change has taken place in food. There are new foods, new combinations of foods, better technology for identifying nutrients, and new processing methods. To keep up with the action, scientists of USDA's Agricultural Research Service are conducting an extensive revision of the Handbook 8. In its revised form, the publication is being issued in looseleaf sections, each of which contains nutrient data for a major food group. The looseleaf format will expedite updating and future data releases. The first two sections recently came off the press and are available for sale from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. The first section, "Composition of Foods: Dairy and Egg Products--Raw, Processed, and Prepared," (AH-8-1) covers 144 dairy and egg products. It costs \$3 a copy. The second of the series, "Composition of Foods: Spices and Herbs--Raw, Processed, and Prepared" (AH-8-2) gives data on 39 individual spices and herbs and four spice mixtures. AH-8-2 costs \$1.30.

USDA PUBLICATIONS TO NOTE

FNS Lists Materials. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service publishes a variety of materials about its food programs: The Child Nutrition Programs, the Food Stamp Program, the Food Distribution Program, and the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children. The materials include publications designed both for persons who might be eligible to take part in the food programs and for those who can spread the word of the availability of food help. Recently, FNS issued a complete listing of the publications and included brief descriptions of each of the educational materials to help in making appropriate selections. To obtain a copy of "Publications of the Food and Nutrition Service," write to the Information Division, Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

AMS Has Color: Los Huevos. Color photographs showing differences between egg grades are featured in a revised Spanish language brochure issued by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. "Como Comprar los Huevos" (How To Buy Eggs) also explains egg sizes and gives tips on using and storing eggs. The publication is one of 13 Spanish language pamphlets in the "How To Buy Food" series that AMS issues in both Spanish and English. The series gives consumers information on U.S. grades for food, tells them how to use this knowledge of quality and provides other food buying advice. Single free copies of "Como Comprar los Huevos" (G-144-S), and of the other pamphlets, may be obtained from the Office of Communication, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

AMS Has Color: Posters. Six new color posters with information on USDA grades for food are now available from the Agricultural Marketing Service. The posters for dairy products, eggs, fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, and poultry explain the USDA grades of each commodity and give other buying tips. They are part of the "How To Buy Food" consumer education materials developed by AMS. The posters, which update earlier ones, are suitable for use in high school and adult education courses. The set of posters may be ordered from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Educators may obtain one set of posters free from the Information Division, Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

NEW VILLAIN IN THE WEST

How Drought Can Cost Us Money. The western drought has so far had little effect on grocery bills, but it can change for the better or worse. And USDA has drought under surveillance. If weather conditions are good this spring and summer, retail food prices in 1977 could average only around 3 percent more than in 1976. But if drought persists, it could have widespread effects. Irrigation water could be diverted from growing such crops as vegetables; parched grazing land could force ranchers to sell off some of their breeding herds; or, evaporating rivers could close down such industries as canning factories. If that happens, drought could push average food costs up around 5 percent from 1976 with even larger year-to-year increases by late in 1977. So, let's hope for rain to drop the drought!

SERVICE is a monthly newsletter of consumer interest. It is designed for those who report to the individual consumer rather than for mass distribution. For information about items in this issue, write Lillie Vincent, Editor of Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Special Reports Division, Room 459-A, Washington, D.C. 20250, or telephone 202-447-5437
